

## Safeguarding Children - The Huntspill Federation

### WHAT TO DO IF YOU ARE WORRIED THAT A CHILD MAY BE SUFFERING ABUSE

Concerns often start with a 'gut reaction'. Perhaps it is something that a child (**a child is anyone under 18 years of age**) has told you or some marks you have seen on a child's body. It may be that someone else has told you something about a child you are dealing with. Sometimes people talk about other children who don't even live in your area. Occasionally, when children are talking about "someone else", they are really talking about themselves, but are testing to see what your reaction is going to be.

However a concern presents itself, it is your responsibility to do something about it, whatever your role is.

Listen carefully to what you are being told. Children are more likely to tell you of their concerns if they think you are taking them seriously. They may already have decided that you are a reliable person. If they are being abused, they may well have been threatened by the abuser and find it hard to talk to anyone about it. Many children have given up talking about concerns, or later retracted what they have already said, when they realise that the adult is not really interested. In listening, you shouldn't prompt the child. If you are unclear about what you are being told, you can say, "Could you explain a bit more", or "I didn't quite get that", or "Is there anything else you think I should know?" Don't use the word "abuse", or ask a question that implies that a particular person may (or may not) have abused the child. Children will often say what they think adults want to hear, and what they then say may make any legal action difficult later. So, open questions are better than leading questions.

If you think that what has been talked about might constitute abuse or neglect (and you don't have to be an expert or be able to prove it), you should explain to the child that what they have said is important, but that you can't keep it to yourself. It is usually a good idea to explain that you can't keep some things secret early on in the conversation if you think that it may be moving in the direction of talking about abuse, so that they do not feel tricked by you later. It may be worth saying that we sometimes have to tell others about these things so that other children can be kept safe as well.

Write down what the child has said as soon as possible after the conversation (or even take a few notes while you are talking together but be careful that this does not inhibit the child talking), and no later than the end of the day. It is very easy to forget important small details after a night's sleep, and in a court of law any evidence that has not been written down soon after the event can be discredited. There is no need for you have a witness present, unless you think there is a good reason to do so, but if there is anyone else present, you should write their name down, write down the date and time, and sign the record. You should ask the other person to also write down what they heard and saw, and also date, time and sign off their record of events.

Only write down facts, such as what the child said, or any marks you may have seen on the child. Use the child's language. So, don't exaggerate or minimize, and don't interpret the signs at this stage.

Make sure that all records are kept locked up, but also that they are accessible to others who need to know (e.g. the deputy designated child protection lead or the head teacher).

If you are still thinking that abuse *may* have occurred, you need to speak to your designated child protection person within your organization. If the signs you have picked up suggest something serious, you need to speak to someone immediately. Once you do that, that person, perhaps with your help, can decide whether this is something that you can handle in-house for the moment, or something that needs discussing with children's Social Care. If you can't access the designated person, or if you are that person, you will need to decide whether to 'phone Somerset Direct - Children's Social Care yourself to seek advice or make a referral.

It is usually important to speak to the parent first. It has been found that in most cases, even where abuse has occurred, parents are more likely to co-operate later if they have concerns shared with them openly and honestly from the start. They may be upset, or they may be angry, but they are seldom dangerous. If you have particular reason to think that they may pose an immediate danger to yourself or the child if you contact them, then speak to someone in Children's Social Care first.

If you are worried that speaking to Children's Social Care will destroy your relationship with the family, bear in mind the likely effect on the child of colluding with possible abuse. The procedures of all our organisations simply do not permit us that option. People are sometimes afraid of being sued (and once in a while are threatened with this by an angry or upset parent). You should not be frightened or intimidated by this. Providing you are not accusing anyone or prompting a child, you are following your duty to communicate your concerns, as detailed in the [www.swcpp.org.uk](http://www.swcpp.org.uk) child protection procedures. These are there to protect you as well as the child.

The Children's Social Care duty officer at Somerset Direct (or emergency duty team, if you need to contact someone out of hours) is there to help you work out what needs to happen next. In most cases advice from the duty officer about what to do in-house or about making a referral to another agency for support or help, may be adequate. Most parents who are at risk of abusing their child physically or neglecting them, are ashamed of what they have done, are often under stress, and would like help to stop. It's when they are not willing to accept the offer of such help or to take responsibility for what they are doing that Children's Social Care may need to take the matter a step further with a home visit, or a formal investigation, which would include contact with the Police.

If the decision is to work with the family in-house, (ie single agency involvement) it is important that all relevant staff talk to each other regularly about their observations, the so-called 'watching brief'. Parents should be involved in all stages, and if the situation does not improve, then a contact or a further contact should be made with Children's Social

Care. People often worry that social workers will 'take over', or remove children or undermine families. Remember that only about 2% of child protection referrals result in children being removed from home. Even then this can only be done by means of a court order (or the decision of a police officer in an emergency).

Remember, it is also, possible for you to discuss your concerns with the duty officer 'in principle', i.e. without mentioning the child's name. In those cases the responsibility for any further action of course remains with you, since no proper record can be kept of the conversation and no linking with existing information.

On the other hand, if you feel that your concern is not being taken seriously enough, you are entitled to express that opinion and the responsibility remains with you to ask for the matter to be reconsidered at a higher level. It is quite normal for there to be some disagreements in the child protection field.

Where the allegation is a serious one, Children's Social Care will contact all the relevant agencies in order to see what other information there is about the child and their family. This can help, as with a jig-saw, in building up a wider picture. Children's Social Care always discuss such situations with the Police, and sometimes the Police will need to interview the child or the parents, if there is reason to think that forensic evidence needs obtaining or if someone needs charging with an offence. In practice, adults are rarely prosecuted (and even more rarely found guilty) in a court of law. Sometimes this is because the evidence wasn't good enough or insufficient, and occasionally it might not be in the interest of the child. The decision to prosecute (or not) is made by the Crown Prosecution Service, not by the Police. However, there remains the option of Children's Social Care instigating care proceedings in the civil court if this is deemed to be in the best interest of the child.

Where there are strong concerns about a child's safety should they remain at home, but where the evidence isn't strong enough to warrant legal proceedings, a child protection conference can be called by Children's Social Care (**or anyone else**). These meetings can be large, and include parents as well as other professionals. All the details around the alleged abuse will be discussed at this meeting, and a decision will be made whether to make the child or children subject to a child protection plan. You will probably have to write a brief report, to be shared with the parents beforehand, and you will be expected to contribute a decision about whether the child's/children should be subject to a protection plan.

**Child protection is everyone's business**